

**Testing the decline of parliament thesis: The parliamentary activity of the
head of government in Ireland, 1923-2002**

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Abstract

There is a long-standing, though contested, argument that in Westminster-style systems parliaments are in decline. The frequency with which the head of government intervenes in parliament is one indicator of this supposed decline. Studies conducted in Britain and Canada show that the frequency of prime ministerial interventions has declined over time, suggesting that the decline of parliament thesis holds true in this regard at least. This article examines the Irish case and shows that the situation is different. As in Britain and Canada, there has been a decline in particular forms of activity (giving speeches and making minor interventions). However, the overall level of prime ministerial activity in Ireland has increased over time. These findings suggest that in the Irish case at least and on the basis of this one indicator the decline of parliament thesis does not hold true. Moreover, when we contextualise the findings, particularly on the basis of a qualitative analysis of the changing nature of the presentation of the Order of Business over the last 30 years, we find that the decline of parliament thesis is weakened further. Thus, this paper suggests that the decline of parliament thesis is not applicable to all examples of Westminster-like parliamentary systems. It also indicates that further research on this topic needs to contextualise the changing nature of the relationship between the head of government and the legislature very carefully.

Testing the decline of parliament thesis: The parliamentary activity of the head of government in Ireland, 1923-2002¹

There is a long-standing, though contested, argument that in Westminster-style systems parliaments are in decline. This paper aims to test the decline of parliament thesis. To do so, we focus on the changing patterns of the parliamentary activity of the head of government. While we acknowledge that this activity only captures part of the decline of parliament thesis, we argue that it is a reasonable proxy to take because we can establish clear expectations about the results we would expect to find, because this indicator relates to some of the main reasons that have been put forward to account for the weakness of parliaments and because others have used this indicator in their work (Dunleavy, Jones and O'Leary et al, 1990; Dunleavy and Jones et al, 1993; Crimmins and Nesbitt-Larking, 1996). On the basis of this indicator, evidence has been found to sustain the decline of parliament thesis (*ibid.*, p. 165).

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In this article, we focus on the parliamentary activity of the head of government in the lower House of the Irish parliament, Dáil Eireann. Ireland adopted many Westminster-style institutional arrangements when it gained independence in 1922. While some of the formal aspects of these arrangements have been amended over the years, the Irish system continues to resemble its British and Canadian counterparts in a number of significant respects, particularly as regards executive-legislative relations. In this context, we would expect the parliamentary activity of the head of government in Ireland to follow the same trajectory as the activity of the British and Canadian prime ministers in their respective legislatures. In fact, on the basis of a computer programme that identified every intervention of the Irish head of government in the Dáil from 1923-2002 inclusive, we found that the situation was different. While the decline in the frequency of giving speeches and making minor interventions was quite similar to the British and Canadian cases, the overall level of activity actually increased during the period in question. The main reason for this increase is that the head of government now presents business items more frequently than before. More than that, qualitative analysis shows that in recent years the presentation of the daily Order of Business has become more adversarial than in the past. These findings suggest that in the Irish case at least the decline of parliament thesis must be challenged. They also require us to provide a more nuanced interpretation of the way in which numerical patterns of parliamentary activity relate to the decline of parliament thesis.

The paper proceeds in five parts. The first part outlines the decline of parliament thesis and justifies the choice of proxy and country case study by which the thesis is examined. The second part recaps the findings of the British and Canadian studies and establishes the precise trends that we would expect to find in the Irish case. The third part sets out briefly the methodology of the Irish study. The fourth part presents the quantitative findings of the Irish study. The fifth part reflects on the decline of parliament thesis and examines qualitative evidence about the changing nature of particular forms of parliamentary activity.

The decline of parliament thesis

There is a long-standing argument that in Westminster-style systems parliaments are in decline. According to this argument, the executive now dominates the legislature. Parliamentary scrutiny of the executive is increasingly ineffective. More and more, parliamentarians are merely lobby fodder. The reasons for this situation are well documented. The requirements of the media, particularly television, mean that attention is focused on the head of government rather than the individual members of legislature. Moreover, heads of government have to focus ever more closely on 'high politics' – foreign policy, defence policy, European policy – rather than the 'low politics' that dominates much of the parliamentary agenda. Indeed, even in the area of 'low politics', policy-making

has become so specialised that the parliamentary arena is no longer the most appropriate forum to discuss and decide policy decisions. In this context, there have long been calls for institutional change to redress this situation (e.g., Crick, 1964). As a result, committee systems have been reformed. Parliamentary sessions have been lengthened. Parliamentarians have been granted greater resources. But it has all been to no avail. In contrast to times past, so the argument goes, parliaments are little more than talking shops. The real decisions are now made elsewhere.

The decline of parliament thesis has a long history. In his classic work on the English Constitution first published in 1867, Walter Bagehot identified the House of Commons as an 'efficient', or working, part of the political system. He wrote:

"The dignified aspect of the House of Commons is altogether secondary to its efficient use ... The House of Commons needs to be impressive, and impressive it is: but its use resides not in its appearance, but in its reality. Its office is not to win power by awing mankind, but to use power in governing mankind" (quoted in Norton, 1992, p. 36).

As we shall see, Bagehot's interpretation of the role of House of Commons at this time has been questioned, but it is important because it created or at least reinforced the idea that there was a 'golden age' of parliament when the House of Commons was central to the governing of the country. In this context, the first explicit proponent of the decline of parliament thesis was Lord Bryce writing in 1921. He did not question Bagehot's interpretation of the House of Commons role in the mid-part of the 19th century. Instead, he argued that its role had

become less central since this time. Moreover, he generalised the argument to other systems of government, including the United States, France and Italy. He wrote:

“Every traveller who, curious in political affairs, enquires in the countries which he visits how their legislative bodies are working, receives from the elder men the same everywhere, that there is less brilliant speaking than in the days of their own youth, that the tone of manners has declined, that the best citizens are less disposed to enter the chamber, that its proceedings are less fully reported and excite less interest, that a seat in it confers less social status, and that, for one reason or another, the respect felt for it has waned” (quoted in Norton, 1992, p. 47).

Again, leaving aside whether or not Bryce provides an accurate interpretation of the role of legislatures, the importance of his work is that it established the decline of parliament thesis as the dominant interpretation of executive-legislative relations not just in the UK but more generally as well. For example, writing in the mid-1960s Kenneth Wheare summed up the received wisdom in the following way:

If a general survey is made of the position and working of legislatures in the present century, it is apparent that, with a few important and striking exceptions, legislatures have declined in certain important respects and particularly in powers in relation to the executive government” (Wheare, 1967, p. 148).

More recently, Graham Thomas argued that executive “dominance over parliament is a marked aspect of the British system of government. However, this needs to be seen in the context of a generalised decline in the ability legislatures to control the executive branch” (Thomas, 2004, p. 8). Indeed, in the conclusion to a set of country case studies of contemporary executive-legislative

relations, Nicholas Baldwin writes: “one concept that appears to permeate the topic is the idea of ‘decline of legislatures’” (Baldwin, 2004, p. 297).

In recent times, though, the decline of parliament thesis has been challenged. There was never a ‘golden age’ of parliament, so the claim goes. The executive domination of the legislature is no greater now than it was a hundred years ago or more. The ability of parliament to scrutinise the executive has not diminished. The head of government has always been the main focus of media attention, not individual parliamentarians or the day-to-day activity of parliament generally. Moreover, it is also argued that even though the executive is still the dominant partner in the relationship with the legislature, parliament retains at least some degree of influence in the system as a whole. It has not been totally marginalised and, depending on the circumstances, it maintains the capacity to embarrass the government and the prime minister.

The decline of parliament thesis has been challenged by a number of writers. For example, speaking about the UK, Philip Norton contests Bagehot’s interpretation that parliament was ever strong in the first place at least in the modern era. As the main author of a recent report, he states:

“there was no ‘golden age’ of Parliament ... Various writers have portrayed part of the nineteenth century as an era of parliamentary strength, when government was constrained by a powerful Parliament. For part of that century, Parliament did on occasion bring down governments. Party cohesion was weak and most

legislation that was passed was not government legislation. That, though, was an era of private legislation and of limited public policy. It is not comparable with the relationship of parliament to government in an era of mass democracy and an expanded public domain" (The Report of the Commission to Strengthen Parliament, 2000, p. 8).

Michael Mezey makes a similar argument. Writing about legislatures generally, he states: "the theme of legislative decline was seldom supported by empirical data and seemed to be based on the largely unsubstantiated premise that at some time in the past a golden age of parliaments existed ..." (Mezey, 1995, p. 196).

While most analysts reject the idea of a 'golden age' of parliament, many also accept that the relationship between the executive and the legislature is an unequal one, with the former dominating the latter. The key point is that this relationship is said to be a long-standing one. For example, Norton writes:

"In terms of policy effect, perceptions of 'decline' have also not been borne out in recent years ... Contrary to what we hypothesised, Parliament has avoided the extremes of marginalisation in the policy cycle. This is not to assert that Parliament has witnessed some accretion of policy-making power ... What it does assert is that Parliament has not slipped back, and certainly not collapsed, to the extent that many critics feared" (Norton, 1990, p. 31).

For Norton, the relationship between the executive and the legislature is dependent upon too many variables for a simple decline of parliament thesis to hold true and he stresses various aspects of the external and internal environment in which legislatures operate (Norton, 1998). Likewise, Nicholas Baldwin, while noting that most of the authors of the aforementioned set of country case studies presuppose the decline of parliament theme, argues that "to

focus on ‘the decline of legislatures’ is too simplistic” (Baldwin, 2004, p. 302). Similar to Norton, he concludes that “despite the fact that many legislatures may be weaker in their capacity to influence policy today than previously, they have been growing in importance in a variety of ways, namely, as the linchpin joining the people to the polity of a nation, as intermediaries in transition from one political order to another, as raisers of grievances, as agencies of oversight and, above all, as forums for scrutiny of the executive” (ibid.). In short, the standard argument about the decline of parliament is challenged.

This paper aims to test the decline of parliament thesis in one significant respect. We do so by focussing on the parliamentary activity of the head of government in the lower House of the Irish parliament, Dáil Eireann. We acknowledge that this form of activity relates to only one aspect of the parliamentary process and, thus, cannot capture the full implications and potential manifestations of either the decline of parliament thesis in Westminster-style systems or the different modes of executive-legislative relations that exist more generally (King, 1976). As the quotation from Baldwin above makes clear, parliaments have many functions and examining the activity of the head of government only captures a part of those functions. However, we argue that the parliamentary activity of the head of government is a reasonable proxy with which to examine the decline of parliament thesis and for three main reasons.

Firstly, the decline of parliament thesis provides clear expectations as to the trends that we would expect to find for this proxy. If the thesis were correct, then we would expect the head of government's level of parliamentary activity to decline over time. Therefore, this proxy provides an opportunity to undertake theory-driven research and allows us to generate clear expectations about our findings.

Secondly, the parliamentary activity of the head of government relates more or less directly to some of the main explanations that are usually put forward to account for the dominance of the executive over the legislature. For example, in the *Strengthening Parliament* report Philip Norton identifies nine developments that have weakened parliament (The Report of the Commission to Strengthen Parliament, 2000, pp. 11-18). At least two of these explanations are indirectly related to the centrality of parliamentary activity: the media revolution and constitutional change, particularly membership of the European Union and the rise of Non-Departmental Public Bodies with independent responsibility for public policy. These developments have shifted the focus of attention away from Parliament and, thus, arguably made it less necessary for the Prime Minister to appear there. In addition, a further explanation – the concentration of power in Downing Street – is directly related to the level of activity and Norton notes that there is evidence of prime ministers “taking Parliament less seriously than before ...” (ibid., p. 16). Thus, while other factors are relevant to the decline of

parliament thesis, the level of the head of government's parliamentary activity seems unequivocally relevant to this thesis.

Thirdly, a number of studies have already examined the pattern of the head of government's parliamentary activity over time and have related their findings to the decline of parliament thesis. Studies of the parliamentary activity of the British prime minister have found that the level of activity has declined over time and have argued that the prime minister has become less accountable to the House of Commons (Dunleavy, Jones and O'Leary et al, 1990; Dunleavy and Jones et al, 1993; and Burnham and Jones, 1995). An equivalent study of the Canadian prime minister came to the same conclusion (Crimmins and Nesbitt-Larking, 1996), leading the authors of the study to make the following assertion: "our data and those of Dunleavy and his colleagues sustain the 'decline of parliament' thesis" (ibid., p. 165). Thus, identifying the pattern of prime ministerial activity in parliament over time is an accepted way of addressing, albeit imperfectly, the decline of parliament thesis.

We examine the parliamentary activity of the head of government in the Irish context. Ireland is a good case to choose for comparative purposes because there are institutional similarities between Ireland, on the one hand, and Britain and Canada, on the other. For example, Anthony King places the Irish head of government alongside the British, German, Greek, Portuguese and Spanish

prime ministers in the category of heads of government who have the highest degree of influence within their own systems of government (King, 1994, p. 152). Brendan O'Leary goes further, stating that: 'Within his own political system the Irish prime minister is potentially more powerful than any other European prime minister, with exception of his British counterpart' (O'Leary, 1991, p. 159). Equally, there are similarities between the Dáil and the British and Canadian Houses of Commons. Alan Siaroff identified 27 different variables with which to classify the different types of parliamentary systems in the world (Siaroff, 2003). Unsurprisingly, he found that the British parliament was included in a set of 'pure' Westminster democracies. Significantly, he also found that Canada and Ireland were only "slightly imperfect variants of the Westminster model" (ibid., p. 456). In addition, Zennaro (2005) confirms the essential similarity between the Dáil and the British House of Commons in this regard. Finally, there is reason to suggest that the decline of parliament thesis is applicable to the Irish case. In a recent review article, O'Halloran (2005, p. 54) states that commentators "mourn the declining relevance of the house". More than that, parliamentarians themselves seem to share this sentiment. Writing in an official report, members of the Dáil and the upper house, the Seanad, noted that "there is a widespread and powerful sense that the two Houses are not fulfilling their functions as effectively as they should, and that their standing and relevance are in decline" (All-Party Oireachtas Committee on the Constitution, 2002, p. 9). They also stated that there is "a view that within the institutions of the state the role of the

legislature has declined *vís-a-vís* ... the executive ..." (ibid). Interestingly, they acknowledged that "the fears that have been expressed about the Dáil and the Seanad have also been expressed about the Houses of Parliament at Westminster, for example" (ibid) and they stressed that "a balanced view needs to be taken".

All in all, despite a number of institutional differences between the three countries, the similarities between them in regard to patterns of executive/legislative relations are such that Ireland is a particularly appropriate case with which to replicate previous British and Canadian studies. Against this background, we would expect the parliamentary activity of the head of government in Ireland to follow the same trajectory as the activity of the British and Canadian prime ministers in their respective House of Commons. We have already noted that these studies found a decline in the level of activity over time. In the next section, we recap the main findings of the British and Canadian studies.

The parliamentary activity of British and Canadian prime ministers

The published studies of the parliamentary activity of the British prime minister cover the period from 1868-1994, namely the Disraeli to Major premierships (Dunleavy, Jones and O'Leary et al, 1990; Dunleavy and Jones et al, 1993; and Burnham and Jones, 1995). The longitudinal nature of the study and the number

of observations that were identified make the findings extremely robust. Moreover, the findings are also intrinsically interesting.

These studies found that the parliamentary activity of the British prime minister had declined over time. In general terms, the overall level of activity was greater in the period prior to 1940 than in the period thereafter. In addition, there was a further decline after the mid-1970s (Dunleavy and Jones et al, 1993, p. 288). Specifically, until the mid-1970s most prime ministers' scores were above the average of the 1940-90 period. However, from 1976 and the James Callaghan premiership there was a further decline. Indeed, the level of activity was particularly low during the Thatcher and then Major years (Burnham and Jones, 1995, p. 559). Reflecting on the first four years of the Major premiership, Burnham and Jones state that it is "still valid to conclude that prime-ministerial accountability to the Commons is in decline" (ibid., p. 561).

In addition to measuring the overall activity of prime ministers, the studies identified trends in four different types of activity: making speeches during parliamentary debates; making off-the-cuff interventions; answering questions; and making statements. The pattern in speech-making followed very closely the trend of overall activity. The underlying trend fell continually (Dunleavy and Jones et al, 1993, p. 282). Noticeably, there was a further decline in the 1980s. The pattern for minor interventions was similar. There was a lower but rather trend-

less level of activity in this regard from the Lloyd George premiership through to 1974, but after that time there was a clear decline. The situation with regard to questions was slightly different. Here, the overall trend was down and the onset of the first Churchill premiership in 1940 marks a clear once-and-for-all decrease. Thereafter, the rules of the House were changed in 1961 with the effect that henceforth two periods of Prime Minister's Question Time were scheduled each week. As a result, there was a great regularity and no further decline in the frequency with which questions until the advent of the Blair premiership. Then, the system was changed again with Prime Minister's Question Time only being held once a week, even though the amount of parliamentary time devoted to such questions remained the same overall. Finally, the situation with regard to statements was rather different. Here, there was a decline in the frequency of statements at the beginning of the 20th century. However, this decline was reversed in the 1940s. While statement-making did then decline again in the 1980s, the frequency during this period was still greater than during the first half of the 20th century.

The findings of these studies are interesting in themselves. However, they are made all the more interesting because similar results emerged in an equivalent Canadian study. Even though the Canadian project covered a shorter time (1949-93), the overall level of prime ministerial activity in the Canadian House of Commons declined over the period in question (Crimmins and Nesbitt-Larking,

1996, p. 152). True, the authors of the study are keen, quite rightly, to point out that Canadian prime ministers had a higher attendance and participation level than their British counterparts across the equivalent period. In the post-war period British prime ministers were active on average approximately 50 days per session, whereas the activity of their Canadian counterparts ranged from a high of 137 days to a low of 69 days. Nevertheless, a basic trend showing a decline in activity is present in the Canadian case. In virtually every session prior to the arrival in office of Pierre Trudeau in 1968 the overall activity of the prime minister each year was greater than the mean standardised score over the period as a whole, whereas the opposite was true for virtually every session after this time.

The trends relating to the individual types of activity in Canada were also quite similar to the British case. In terms of speeches, Canadian prime ministers delivered more speeches on average than their British counterparts, but the frequency of speech-making declined significantly during the period under consideration. The trend for minor interventions is the same. The situation with regard to questions is rather different. As in the UK, there was a fairly consistent level of activity in this regard in the period from the late 1950s to the mid-1980s. However, there was a lower frequency of question-answering during the St Laurent and Mulroney premierships that began and ended the Canadian study. Thus, a trend is difficult to discern. As regards statements, once again the pattern

is very similar to the British case. The frequency with which statements were made was relatively high up to the late 1960s, but then it declined.

All told, even though there is some variation between the Canadian and British cases, the basic trends in the two countries are the same, both in terms of overall activity and in terms of most of the individual forms of activity. We now turn to the Irish case to see whether the expectations derived from the decline of parliament thesis are realised and to discover whether the Irish results match the basic British and Canadian results.

The Irish case: methodology

There have been 11 different heads of government in Ireland since the formation of the state in 1922.² (See Figure 1). In order to establish whether there has been a decline in the parliamentary activity over this time, we identified every parliamentary intervention of the head of government in the Dáil in the period 1923-2002 inclusive.³ A computer programme was written that allowed the automatic identification of every intervention using the on-line record of Dáil

² The head of government was known as the President of the Executive Council from 1922-37 and as An Taoiseach thereafter.

³ The small number of interventions in the upper House, Seanad Eireann, were not included in the figures.

debates. These debates are complete and fully searchable. We are confident that every intervention – and there were interventions on more than 5,000 days in total over the whole period – has been logged.⁴

Figure 1: Heads of government in Ireland since 1922

Name	Party	Date
William T. Cosgrave	Cumann na nGaedheal*	1922-32
Eamon de Valera	Fianna Fáil	1932-48
John A. Costello	Fine Gael	1948-51
Eamon de Valera	Fianna Fáil	1951-54
John A. Costello	Fine Gael	1954-57
Eamon de Valera	Fianna Fáil	1957-59
Seán Lemass	Fianna Fáil	1959-66
Jack Lynch	Fianna Fáil	1966-73
Liam Cosgrave	Fine Gael	1973-77
Jack Lynch	Fianna Fáil	1977-79
Charles Haughey	Fianna Fáil	1979-81
Garret FitzGerald	Fine Gael	1981-82

⁴ The head of government intervened on 5,053 days in total over the 80 years of the study.

Charles Haughey	Fianna Fáil	1982
Garret FitzGerald	Fine Gael	1982-87
Charles Haughey	Fianna Fáil	1987-92
Albert Reynolds	Fianna Fáil	1992-94
John Bruton	Fine Gael	1994-97
Bertie Ahern	Fianna Fáil	1997-

* Cumann na nGaedheal was the forerunner of Fine Gael

Having identified every intervention, the classification and analysis of those interventions closely followed the methodology used in the British and Canadian cases.⁵ For example, once an intervention was identified, it was then coded under one of five separate headings:

⁵ It should be noted that the British and Canadian studies themselves did not use exactly the same methodology. (For the differences between the UK and the Canadian study, see Crimmins, and Nesbitt-Larking, 1996, p. 164). In the same way, while the methodology used in the Irish study is very close to the methodology for these previous studies, there are some slight differences. There are two main differences between the British and Irish studies. Firstly, in the UK the yearly unit commenced with the State Opening of Parliament in September. In the Irish case, however, calculations were based on the calendar year. Secondly, the British and Canadian studies distinguished between four types of activity. In the Irish case a fifth category, Business and Protocol items, was also included. While this means that the findings of the three studies cannot be

- delivering a prepared speech of more than 10 lines of text during a debate
- making a minor or off-the-cuff intervention, point of order or impromptu response
- answering oral questions, including private notice questions - replies to written questions were not considered
- making a formal statement
- presenting business and protocol items, including the order of business, expressions of sympathy on the death of a member, former member, or prominent personality, and reading items into the parliamentary record, including the announcement of by-elections and ministerial appointments⁶

Crucially, and consistent with the methodology used in the British and Canadian studies, multiple interventions of the same kind on any single day were not recorded individually. In other words, if the head of government answered two questions on one day, the data set records only one day's unit of question-answering activity.

compared on a year-by-year basis, it is perfectly possible to compare general trends.

⁶ While we can be confident that the computer programme identified every intervention automatically, there was a degree of subjectivity as regards the classification of certain interventions. In most cases, it was clear in which category an intervention should be placed. In a limited number of cases, though, a judgement call had to be made. Overall, the large number of interventions means that any contestable judgements do not affect the general trends overall.

Having identified all the daily units of interventions, the data set was processed to produce three types of scores: 'spacing' scores; 'standardised' scores; and 'adjusted average' scores. Again, the methodology for arriving at these scores was consistent with the British and Canadian studies.

Spacing scores provide a basic set of figures that indicate the average number of days between parliamentary interventions. It is calculated by adding up the total number of days in which the Dáil was in session during a head of government's term of office and dividing that figure by the number of parliamentary days on which the head of government was active during that time (Dunleavy, Jones and O'Leary, 1990, p. 125). The resulting figure indicates the average space in days between one intervention and the next.

In the final section of this paper we argue that spacing scores can be used to contextualise the nature of the head of government's parliamentary activity. However, a problem with spacing scores is that they are overly sensitive to the most common form of activity. To address this problem, standardised scores are calculated. These are designed to capture variations over time in the multiple forms of activity that heads of government undertake (Dunleavy and Jones et al, 1993, p. 287). For each form of parliamentary activity (answering questions,

making statements etc.), the standardised measure of overall activism is calculated on the basis of the following equation:

$$\text{Standard} = \frac{\text{actual score for activity in year } x - \text{mean for that activity, 1923-2002}}{\text{standard deviation for that activity, 1923-2002}}$$

This provides a score for each form of activity for each year. The sum of the five scores for each year is then calculated. The resulting figure provides a standardised score for the overall level of activity in that year. As a function of these calculations, a score of 0 represents the average level of activity over the period as a whole. Thus, a negative score points to a less active year overall, whereas a positive score indicates the opposite. In short, the advantage of standardised scores is that they reflect how exceptional or routine the year's scores were across the range of parliamentary activities (*ibid.*). One type of activity does not dominate the figures.

While spacing scores and standardised scores capture different aspects of the overall activity of the head of government, adjusted average scores are used to assess the frequency of individual forms of activity. Adjusted average scores are designed to control for the varying number of days in the parliamentary year (Dunleavy and Jones, 1993, p. 298). They are based on the average length of the parliamentary year across the entire data set. There were 6,403 days of

parliamentary activity over the 80 years under consideration, giving a mean of 80.0375 days per year. The adjusted average score for each activity is then based on the following formula: $A_x(D/N_x)$, where A_x = the actual score in year 'x' for the particular type of activity; D = the mean number of days the Dáil sat across the entire period (i.e. 80.0375); and N_x = the actual number of days that the Dáil sat in year 'x'. This method allows better comparison of the individual forms of activity of heads of government as it automatically adjusts for variations in the annual length of Dáil sittings.

The Irish case: findings

The spacing scores allow us to make a judgement about the basic frequency of the head of government's activity in parliament. In the British case, prime ministers intervened in the House of Commons once every 2.04 days on average across the 1868-1987 period as a whole and once every 1.80 days in the period prior to 1940 compared with every 2.31 days in the period after this time (Dunleavy, Jones and O'Leary, 1990, p. 126). Table 1 provides the equivalent figures for Ireland. It shows that Irish heads of government intervened on average once every 1.27 parliamentary days in the period from 1923-2002. For his

part, Seán Lemass intervened most frequently - every 1.05 days - while Eamon de Valera intervened least frequently - every 1.98 days.⁷

Table 1
Parliamentary days between any type of intervention, 1923-2002

William T. Cosgrave	1.17
Eamon de Valera	1.98
John A. Costello	1.17
Seán Lemass	1.05
Jack Lynch	1.12
Liam Cosgrave	1.10
Charles J. Haughey	1.10
Garret FitzGerald	1.18
Albert Reynolds	1.08
John Bruton	1.20
Bertie Ahern	1.28
Mean	1.27

⁷ The authors do not provide equivalent figures for Canada.

These data do not provide evidence to suggest that the same trend has occurred in Ireland as in Britain and Canada. Recall that in these latter two countries parliamentary activity declined over time and that in Britain there was a further decline in recent times. In Ireland, while it is true that Bertie Ahern intervened second most infrequently of all heads of government, his average rate of intervention - every 1.28 days - is only marginally above the mean for the period as a whole. So, the evidence for a decline in very recent times is not particularly strong. What is more, de Valera stands out as the person who intervened least often and he was in office during the early and middle years of the study. So far, then, the Irish trend appears to confound the equivalent British experience.

As noted above, the spacing scores only serve as a very rough indicator of parliamentary activity because they simply reflect the frequency of the most common individual activity. Standardised scores allow for a more nuanced interpretation as they control for the fact that heads of government can engage in multiple forms of activity if they so wish. The standardised scores for the Irish case are shown in Table 2. These scores allow us to identify four distinct periods of activity. (See below). Taken together, the standardised scores confirm that the pattern of overall parliamentary activity in Ireland runs counter to what would have been expected given the findings of the British and Canadian studies.

Table 2 about here.

The first period of activity is confined to the first half of the William T. Cosgrave premiership in the early years of the State. The level of activity during this period was extremely high. Indeed, this period contains the two most active years on record so far (1923 and 1924). The second period of activity runs from the latter half of the Cosgrave premiership to the end of the Eamon de Valera years in 1959 and incorporates the two John A. Costello premierships. The overall level of activity during this period was relatively low. In fact, the 15 most inactive years are all included in this period and the level of activity was below average every year during this time. The third period runs from 1960, the first full year in office of Seán Lemass, to 1988, the middle of the Charles Haughey period. Here, the situation is rather different. There are some relatively active years during this period. This observation is sufficient to mark it out from the previous period. At the same time, there are also some quite inactive years. As a result, this period can be distinguished from the previous one, but overall it is rather trend-less. The final period runs from 1989 to 2002 inclusive. Here, there is a set of relatively active years. Indeed, only one uninterrupted year during this period was negative - the very last year under consideration - and it includes five of the nine most active years identified in the study as a whole. Overall, despite the finding that Ahern's activity in 2002 was below average, the last decade or so has seen a relatively high level of parliamentary activity by the head of government.

Taking these four periods together, it is clear that the trends identified in the British and Canadian cases are not replicated in Ireland. It is certainly the case that the first two years of the Irish study were the most active overall. However, this high level of activity soon ended. It is also true that the final year under consideration was a relatively inactive one. Even so, this dip does not provide evidence of a general decline. In between, the trend was the reverse of the one identified in Britain and Canada. In Ireland, there was a relatively low level of activity from the late 1920s to the beginning of the 1960s when activity picked up somewhat. Moreover, there was then a general rise of activity in the 1990s. This finding provides circumstantial evidence to suggest that on the basis of this measure at least the decline of parliament thesis is not applicable in the Irish case.

In terms of individual types of parliamentary activity, the adjusted average scores in Table 3 show that the Irish pattern of activity was similar to the British and Canadian patterns in regard to speeches. That is to say, there was a greater degree of activity in the early years of the study than in the later ones. On average Irish heads of government delivered a speech on 12.0 days each year, adjusting for the varying length of sitting days across the period as a whole. Three of the first four heads of government were all at or above this average figure. The subsequent seven heads of government were all below. There is no evidence to suggest that there was a further decline in the 1980s, as would be

expected from the British case. Nonetheless, it is clear that there has been a decline in speech making across the period as a whole.

Table 3
Adjusted average scores of prime-ministerial activity in Ireland (1923-2002) in
days per year

	Speeches	Minor interv- entions	State- ments	Quest- ions	Business items
William T. Cosgrave	24.4	55.8	0.1	25.0	46.5
Eamon de Valera	15.1	20.2	0.7	22.0	14.1
John A. Costello	10.3	16.0	0.9	31.0	65.2
Seán Lemass	12.1	16.2	1.1	50.3	74.4
Jack Lynch	7.6	13.2	2.6	37.2	68.5
Liam Cosgrave	6.9	6.6	4.2	16.1	72.0
Charles J. Haughey	10.0	15.0	4.3	32.0	72.4
Garret FitzGerald	7.6	12.0	4.8	21.3	67.2
Albert Reynolds	6.1	8.5	8.7	31.9	72.8
John Bruton	5.3	5.0	5.1	40.0	62.5
Bertie Ahern	7.4	7.0	7.0	42.7	61.4

Mean	12.0	18.8	2.6	30.3	52.3
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The pattern with regard to minor interventions mirrors the British and Canadian cases more closely still. There was an adjusted average of 18.8 minor interventions per year across the whole period. The first two heads of government in Ireland intervened more frequently than average and the last nine all intervened less frequently. What is more, the two most recent heads of government - Bruton and Ahern - were two of the three least active heads of government in this regard. So, while there has been a decline in minor interventions across the period as a whole, there is some evidence to suggest that there has been a further decline in minor interventions in the 1990s.

The situation with regard to statements is also similar to the British case where there was a rise over time. In Ireland, there was an adjusted average of only 2.6 statements per year. The first four heads of government in the study were all below this figure. The six most recent heads of government are all above. So, while the increase in statement-making post-dates the equivalent increase in Britain, the basic pattern is the same in the two countries.

In Britain and Canada the situation with regard to questions was rather different. In both cases, an overall trend was difficult to identify. A similar situation occurs

in the Irish case, but there is at least some evidence of a pattern that confounds the basic expectation about a supposed decline in the activity of heads of government over time. In Ireland, heads of government answered questions on average 30.3 days per year in the period as a whole. The figures for the first two heads of government – spanning most of the period 1923-1959 – were all below average. By contrast, the figures for the three most recent heads of government – covering the last decade of the study – were all above average, although only just so in the case of Albert Reynolds. In between these two periods, there is a great deal of volatility. Lemass answered questions more frequently than anyone else, while Liam Cosgrave answered questions least frequently of anyone. Overall, the absence of a definitive trend in the Irish case mirrors the British and Canadian experiences. Even so, the Irish case does give some support to the idea that parliamentary activity with regard to answering questions has increased over the period as a whole and that, in particular, there was a noteworthy increase in this form of activity in the last decade of the study.

The final form of activity identified in the Irish case was the presentation of business items. This form of activity requires some introduction. In Ireland, the head of government remains the *de facto* Leader of the House. This means that the head of government is responsible for the presentation of all business items, including the Order of Business, the announcement of by-elections, discussion of standing orders and so forth. In Britain and Canada the situation is different. In

Canada there has long been a separate position of House Leader for the party in government. In Britain, Churchill delegated this function to a separate office in 1940 and the increase in the average number of days between interventions in the period after 1940 is at least in part a function of this decision. In the Irish study, it was decided to separate the presentation of business items from other forms of activity. This was partly because it proved impossible to determine how such items had been classed in the British study prior to Churchill's 1940 decision. It was also felt that a separate category for business items would help to provide a more rounded interpretation of the decline of parliament thesis (see below).⁸

In terms of business items, the adjusted average scores provide superficial evidence to suggest, once again, that the expectations generated by the British

⁸ One concern is that business items were not included at all in the British study. If so, their inclusion here might skew the findings considerably. To account for this possibility, we recalculated the standardised scores excluding all business items. The results are not presented here, but the basic finding of the paper is not altered. Omitting business items, we found that the trends up to the end of the 1950s were very similar to the ones identified in Table 2 when business items were included. However, in the 1960s and early 1970s most years were lower than average, whereas when business items were included they were mainly above average (see Table 2). Crucially, though, after 1974 even when business items were excluded all years except for two remained above average. So, at the time when this form of parliamentary activity was very low in Britain, it was relatively high in Ireland.

and Canadian studies were not met in the Irish case. Even so, further investigation suggests a slightly different result, albeit one that does not allow a definitive conclusion to be drawn. In Ireland, heads of government presented business items on average 52.3 days per year. The first two heads of government, who, it must be remembered, were in office for a considerable period of time in total, were below average. All other heads of government were above average. This suggests that in Ireland the presentation of business items has become more integral to the activity of the head of government since the early years of the state, thus contributing significantly to confounding the overall pattern in Britain and Canada. All the same, it might be noted that Bruton and Ahern presented business items less frequently than anyone other than de Valera⁹ or Cosgrave. Consequently, there is some evidence to suggest a slight decline in this form of activity in the last few years.

To sum up the Irish findings, the overall figures suggest that there has been an increase in the parliamentary activity of the head of government over time.

⁹ De Valera systematically delegated the daily presentation of the Order of Business to a colleague for most of the period from 1934-35 onwards. This decision would appear to be a function of a physical ailment. From a very early stage in his term of office de Valera's eyesight was extremely poor. Indeed, his first serious treatment in this respect occurred as early as 1936 (Longford and

When we examine the individual forms of activity, we find that the overall rise in activity is largely the result of the more frequent presentation of business items by the head of government from 1960 onwards, notwithstanding the slight decline in this activity from the mid-1990s onwards. It is also due to the greater incidence of statements in recent times and to a higher level of question answering, although the pattern in the 1960s-1980s was not very clear in this regard. The increases in these forms of activity have offset the general decline in speech-making and minor interventions. In relation to the decline of parliament thesis and the findings of the British and Canadian studies, the Irish results confound the general expectation that the overall level of activity should have fallen generally and that there should have been a further decline in recent times. With regard to the patterns for speeches, minor interventions and statements, a similar pattern was observed across all three countries. However, in Ireland the pattern for question answering was slightly different and the trend in recent years has been upwards. Moreover, the presentation of business items remains an important activity in the Irish case.

The parliamentary activity of the head of government in Ireland and the decline of parliament thesis

O'Neill, 1970, pp. 422-23). The figures suggest that de Valera's ailment affected

Measured by the parliamentary activity of the head of government, the results suggest that there has not been a decline of parliament in the Irish case since 1923. On the contrary, they indicate that in the 1990s parliament was more central to the political process than at any time since the formation of the state.¹⁰ The finding is important in the wider context. Even though Ireland's institutional structures have been changed over time and although the Irish multi-party system bears little resemblance to the British party system, Ireland still has many elements of a Westminster-style system. The finding that there has been an increase in the head of government's parliamentary activity over time suggests that political developments within Westminster-like systems are not unidirectional. The fact that the Irish results confound the British and Canadian results is significant.

That said, the Irish results also encourage further reflection as to how the figures for the parliamentary activity of the head of government can be related to the decline of parliament thesis. In this regard, two points stand out: the first concerns the measurement of the overall activity of the head of government; the second relates to the intensity of parliamentary activity.

this element of his parliamentary activity more than any other.

In terms of the measurement of the overall activity of the head of government, we would like to rehabilitate the use of spacing scores. In their first study Dunleavy, Jones and O’Leary (1990) relied heavily on such scores, whereas in the second study they were said to provide a “misleading picture” (Dunleavy and Jones, 1993, p. 287) and standardised scores were adopted instead. We agree with the authors of the British study that the standardised scores provide a better overall picture of parliamentary activity because they control for all of the different types of activity that exist. At the same time, we think it is useful to report the spacing scores and not just for their own sake. These scores indicate how often heads of government come to parliament and engage in some sort of activity or other. True, they are skewed because they reflect the most common form of activity. Nonetheless, they provide a basic record of how frequently heads of government intervene. The results in Table 2 showed that in Ireland heads of government have tended to intervene in parliament around four sitting days in every five. Whatever the problems with spacing scores and whether or not heads of government attended willingly or under duress, this is a remarkable figure. The head of government’s engagement with the legislature is almost permanent. This corresponds to a remarkable investment in time on the part of the Irish head of government who clearly has many other aspects to his/her job.

¹⁰ O’Halpin (1998) also argues that the role of the Dáil has increased in recent times, although his study is based on different types of evidence.

In relation to the qualitative interpretation of the results, we would like to stress that it is not just the quantity of activity but also the changing nature of the activity that matters. To make this point, we focus on the presentation of business items in the Irish case. The presentation of the Order of Business became an almost daily feature of the head of government's parliamentary activity from the time when de Valera left office in 1959. Since this time, though, the adversarial nature of this activity has increased. For example, in 1963 the Dáil sat for 82 days and the head of government, Seán Lemass, presented the Order of Business on all but two of those days. Thus, in relation to this form of activity Lemass was very active during his term of office. However, at this time the presentation of the Order of Business was a largely uncontentious matter. The Taoiseach, as de facto Leader of the House, merely read the day's agenda into the parliamentary record. For instance, on 29 January 1963 the presentation of the Order of Business comprised the following intervention by Lemass: "It is proposed to take business in the following order: Nos. 1, 10, 11, 12, and 13 – Votes 6 and 8. Private Members' Business will be taken from 6 p.m. to 7.30 p.m." (<http://historical-debates.oireachtas.ie/D/0199/D.0199.196301290053.html>, accessed 22 July, 2004). There were occasions throughout the year when there was some discussion of the Order of Business, but only very rarely was it the source of political controversy. This situation changed from the late 1970s onwards. The presentation of the Order of Business is now a dramatic act of

political theatre. For instance, in 2001 the Dàil sat for 68 days and the head of government, Bertie Ahern, presented the Order of Business every single day. So, in relative terms the Taoiseach was only slightly more active than his counterpart nearly 40 years earlier. However, in contrast to the situation in 1963, on 31 January 2001 the Order of Business sparked a very heated discussion that lasted for more than 30 minutes and that took up over 13 columns of the parliamentary record

(<http://historical-debates.oireachtas.ie/D/0529/D.0529.200101310002.html>, accessed 22 July, 2004).

Moreover, this day was not exceptional. Opposition parties now routinely use the Order of Business to raise topical issues of the day. It is no longer the occasion for the Taoiseach merely to present a procedural record of the government's business to parliament. In other words, what this example shows is that not only has the frequency of parliamentary activity increased in Ireland over the years, so too has the intensity of the most common individual form of activity which heads of government now undertake.

These points are not simply academic. They affect the interpretation of the decline of parliament thesis. In short, we argue that it is important to contextualise the standardised scores. For example, whatever their limitations, we argue that spacing scores provide us with a further insight into the relationship between the head of government and parliament. In the Irish case, they indicate that the Taoiseach has had an almost daily presence in the Dàil in

recent times. Given the time pressures on leaders and especially those in the modern age, this commitment to the parliamentary arena is remarkable. In addition, given that neither the standardised scores nor the spacing scores tell us anything about the nature of the head of government's activity in parliament, we also believe it is important to contextualise the quantitative results with qualitative analysis. In our study, we found that in Ireland the intensity of the head of government's parliamentary activity had increased since the 1960s. In particular, over the course of the last 20-30 years the presentation of the Order of Business has tended to become a more prolonged and adversarial activity. Taken together, these points combine to make a powerful argument. They confound the decline of parliament thesis and they contradict the findings of the equivalent British and Canadian studies.

Conclusion

This article has examined the parliamentary activity of the head of government in Ireland. The findings show that the overall level of activity has increased in the period 1923-2002. These results stand at odds with those from previous studies of Britain and Canada and confound the expectations of the decline of parliament thesis generally. While we acknowledge that this focus captures only one element of this thesis, we argue that it is an important one. In this context, the findings of our study are significant. They suggest that the decline of parliament

thesis is not applicable to all examples of Westminster-style parliamentary systems. Thus, they indicate the need for further investigations of this sort. What would the findings be for Australia and New Zealand? Would there be equally divergent findings in non-Westminster systems.¹¹ Even though we argue that the parliamentary activity of the head of government is a justifiable proxy with which to examine the decline of parliament thesis, we have also emphasised the need to place the findings of the study in a broader context so as to illuminate the relationship between the head of government and the legislature. We have emphasised the usefulness of spacing scores as an indicator of this relationship, as long as these scores are used in combination with the more standard indicators identified in the British and Canadian studies. We have also stressed the importance of the changing nature of the head of government's parliamentary interventions. To this end, we examined the presentation of the Order of Business in Ireland over the last 30 years and found that there had been an increase in intensity over this time. Again, this finding helped further to confound the decline of parliament thesis in the Irish case. Further investigation might try to capture such developments perhaps by calculating the amount of parliamentary time that has been devoted to the presentation of the Order of Business over the years. By the same token, a more qualitative examination of the head of government's activity with regard to answering questions might also

¹¹ See Furlong (2004) for a preliminary analysis of the Italian case.

provide important contextual information with which to interpret the decline of parliament thesis. In these ways, we hope that we have added to the existing research about the parliamentary activity of heads of government and that we have indicated certain ways in which this work might be progressed in the years to come.

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